NONSENSE RHYMES

Sukumar Roy

Transcreated by

Satyajit Ray

Sukumar Ray

NONSENSE RHYMES

Babybird — children's books
Blackbird — serious comics
Bluebird — drama
Greenbird — fiction
Greybird — reference
Garubird — educational texts
Indi-bird — regional language versions
Mini-bird — small-size classics
Neobird — experimentalia
Redbird — poetry
Saffronbird — transcreation
Silverbird — screenplays
Violetbird — miscellany

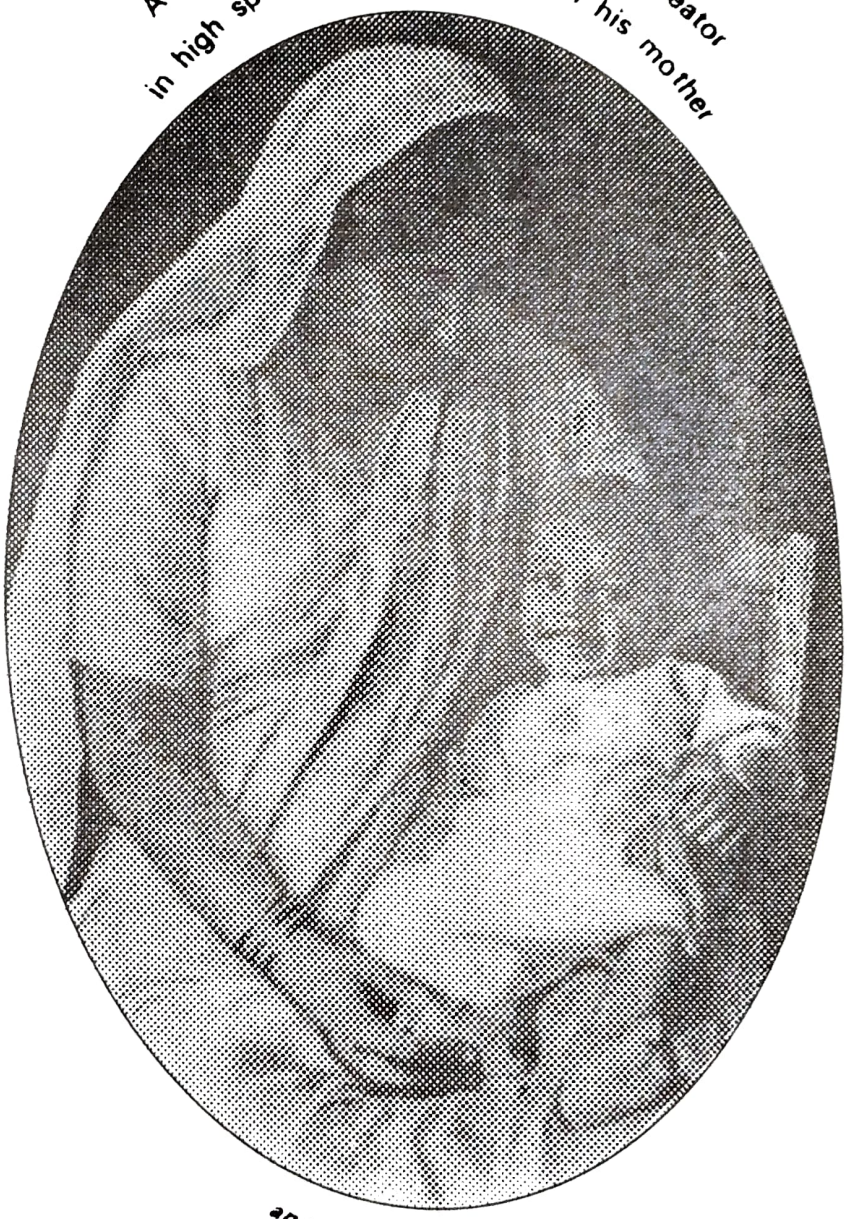
Two birds sit
on the golden bough
of the pippala tree.
One eats
the sweet fruit.
The other watches.
Both are happy.
One is happier.
Which?

Śvetāśvatara
Upaniṣad IV : 6

A Writers Workshop Saffronbird Book

Hardback Limited Edition : ₹ 160

A rare photograph showing the transcreator in high spirits in the company of his mother



anno aetatis six months

Sukumar Ray

Nonsense Rhymes

Translated by Satyajit Ray

With Sukumar Ray's original sketches
and
Afterword by Sibaji Bandyopadhyay

Nonsense Rhymes
by Sukumar Ray, translated by Satyajit Ray
1970 Limited Signed Edition
1997 2nd Edition, 2009 3rd Edition
2019 Corrected and Expanded 4th Edition
2022 Expanded 5th Edition

Translations © Sandip Ray
Afterword © Sibaji Bandyopadhyay
Translation of Afterword © Parantap Chakraborty

ISBN 978-81-958199-3-5

WRITERS WORKSHOP books are published by Dr. Ananda Lal from C-532 Lake Gardens, Calcutta 700045, India. Layout and lettering by P. Lal with a Sheaffer calligraphy pen. Printed by Abhijit Nath at 128 Lake Gardens, Calcutta 700045.

This is a limited edition. Gold-embossed, hand-stitched, hand-pasted & hand-bound by Tulamiah Mohiuddin with handloom sari cloth woven & designed in India, to provide visual beauty & the intimate texture of book-feel. WW bindings are not concealed behind ephemeral glossy jackets. Each WW publication is a hand-crafted artifact.

www.writersworkshopindia.com

SUKUMAR RAY
(1887-1923)

Father of the celebrated film-maker Satyajit Ray (1921-1993), wrote mainly for children; but today it would be difficult to find an educated man of any age in Bengal whose memory does not retain a large assortment of Sukumar Ray's verses. Apparently he wrote only nonsense verses, but there is a substratum of deeper sense underlying these . . . These verses are not satirical but are permeated by pure humour of the highest quality. They have been collected in two volumes, *Abol Tabol* and *Khai Khai*. Sukumar Ray also wrote a phantasy named *Hajabarala*, and a number of stories about the exploits of a schoolboy . . . Tagore was inspired to write some nonsense verses on the model of Sukumar Ray, but he had to admit that writing such stuff was not easy at all. Indeed, he is reported to have observed on one occasion that he could perhaps be everything else but never a Sukumar Ray.

Ajit Kumar Dutt
"Humour in Bengali Literature"

Publisher's Note

In 1969, in an issue of *Now*, a stimulating radical weekly edited by Samar Sen, I came across a bunch of "nonsense verses" by Sukumar Ray translated/transcreated from the original Bengali *Abol Tabol* by his son Satyajit Ray. Sukumar Ray's nonsense fun makes very serious sense if one reads between the lines – as do Manik-da's Feluda and other stories which are for children but for child-like adults as well. I wrote to him asking if I could bring out a limited edition of his delightful versions. He not only agreed, but was gracious enough to inscribe one hundred copies with his arabesqued signature, reproduced below. An admirer of his book-cover design (for the Signet Press and, later, other publishers), and his practice of calligraphy, I asked him to do the layout of this book. He was busy with a film project, and passed on the responsibility to me. The zany titlings are my little contribution. I thank his son Sandip for permitting this new limited edition. Not many are aware of Manik-da's skill in manipulating English metre and rhyme. A great pity he did not do more poems from *Abol Tabol*.

The frontispiece photograph was supplied by my mother-in-law, the late Santa Devi, from a private family album. It was presented to her and other friends by Suprabha Devi, Satyajit's mother, to celebrate the birth of her only child.

1997

Stew Much! 8

The King of Bombardia 10

The Missing Whiskers 12

The Sons of Rangaroo 14

Odour in the Court 16

Baburam the Snake Charmer 18

Old Tickler 20

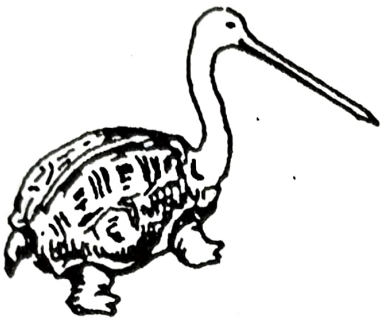
The Old Woodman 22

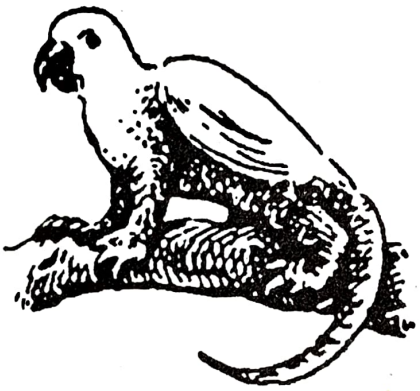
Groomy Tidings 24

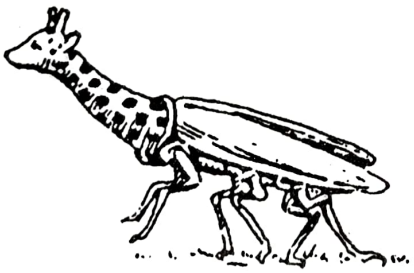
Uncle's Invention 26

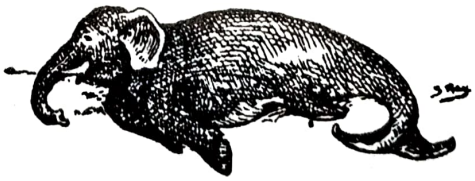
Prey for Me 28

Afterword by Sibaji Bandyopadhyay 31
(Translated by Parantap Chakraborty)









Sukumar Ray / Satyajit Ray
NONSENSE RHYMES

STEW MUCH!

A duck once met a porcupine; they formed a corporation
Which called itself a Porcuduck (a beastly conjugation!).
A stork to a turtle said, 'Let's put my head upon your torso;
We who are so pretty now, as Stortle would be more so!'
The lizard with the parrot's head thought: Taking to the chilli
After years of eating worms is absolutely silly.
A prancing goat – one wonders why – was driven by a need
To bequeath its upper portion to a crawling centipede.
The giraffe with grasshopper's limbs reflected: Why should I
Go for walks in grassy fields, now that I can fly?
The nice contented cow will doubtless get a frightful shock
On finding that its lower limbs belong to a fighting cock.
It's obvious the Whalephant is not a happy notion:
The head goes for the jungle, while the tail turns to the ocean.
The lion's lack of horns distressed him greatly, so
He teamed up with a deer – now watch his antlers grow!

Sukumar Ray / Satyajit Ray
NONSENSE RHYMES

THE KING OF BOMBARDIA

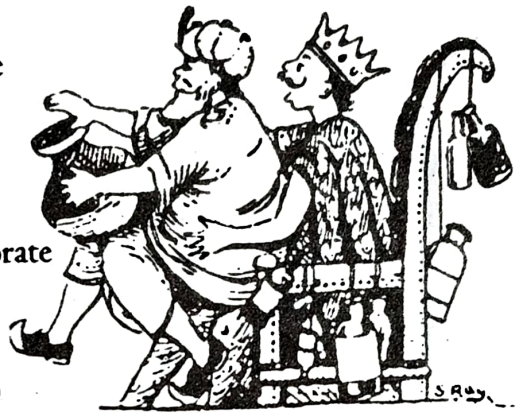
In the land of Bombardia
The customs are peculiar:

The King, for instance, advocates
Gilded frames for chocolates,
While the Queen – who goes to bed
With pillows strapped around her head –
Insists her brothers specialise
In sticking nails in custard pies.

On moonlit nights the Bombardian –
His eyes all painted vermilion –
Keeps his silver pocket watch
Immersed in boiling butterscotch.
And if by chance he catches cold
He somersaults (if not too old).

Musicians there – a sturdy lot –
Use woollen wrappers when it's hot,
And the scholar propagates
Pasting bills on balding pates.

When the King sits on the throne
He starts hee-hawing in baritone,
And on his lap P. Minister
Just sits and beats a canister.
(The throne, you know, they decorate
With bottles of bicarbonate.)



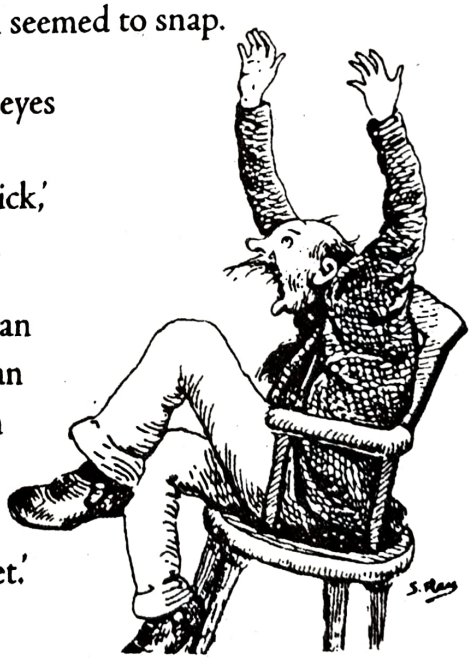
The King's old aunt (an autocrat)
Hits pumpkins with her cricket bat,
While uncle loves to dance mazurkas
Wearing garlands strung with hookahs.

All of which, though mighty queer,
Is natural in Bombardia.

THE MISSING WHISKERS

They always knew the Boss Babu
To be a gentle fellow,
What happens if he in a jiffy
Turns all blue and yellow?

He was seated in his chair
Relaxed and free from care,
    Indulging in his post-meridian nap,
When, without a warning,
In the middle of his yawning,
    Something right inside him seemed to snap.



With muffled cries he rolled his eyes
    And threw his arms about.
'Alas, I'm sick. Come save me quick,'
    Was what he sputtered out.

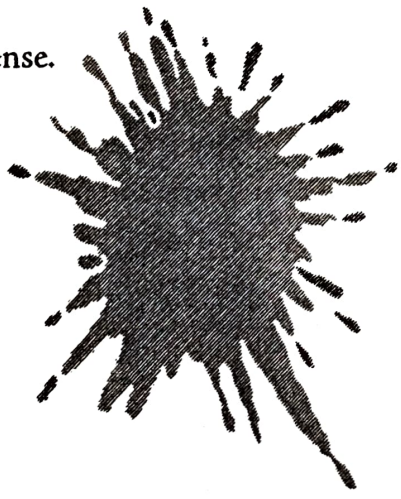
They heard him and they all began
To cluster round the stricken man
And pondered on the safest plan
    To bring him to his senses.
'Call the police!' 'No – the vet.'
His partner said, 'He seems upset.'
'But careful – he might bite yet,'
    Said his amanuensis.

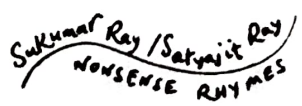
But Boss Babu – his face all red and swollen –
Now declared, 'My moustache has been stolen.'

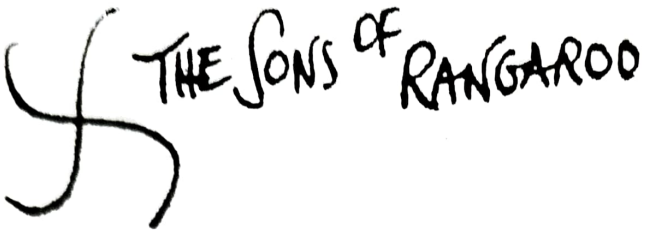
'Stolen whiskers?' they all cried.
'The Babu must be pacified.'
And so they held a mirror to his face.
'There, sir,' they said. 'You see
Your whiskers where they used to be?
Who would dare to put you in disgrace?'

Babu now began to scream:
'You dunderheads, I wouldn't dream
    Of ever wearing whiskers so outrageous.
They make me look a shaggy butcher.
Know this – in the near future
    I ought to – no, I *must* reduce your wages.'
This he did. And then at random
He composed a memorandum,
    Herewith quoted (minus appendages):

'If you think your employees
Deserve your love – correction, please:
They don't. They're fools. No commonsense.
They're full of crass incompetence.
The ones in my establishment
Deserve the highest punishment.
They show their cheek in not believing
Whiskers lend themselves to thieving.
Their moustaches, I predict,
Will soon be mercilessly picked;
And when that happens they will know
What Man is to Moustachio:
Man is slave, Moustache is master,
Losing which Man meets disaster.'







To the sons of Rangaroo
Laughter is taboo.
A funny tale will make them wail:
'We're not amused, boo-hoo!'

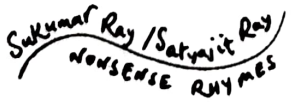
They live in constant fear
Of chuckles far and near
And start and bound at every sound
That brings a breath of cheer.

Their peace of mind forfeiting
They sit and keep repeating:
'We believe in only grieving;
Happiness is fleeting.'

They shun the summer breeze
That whispers through the trees
For fear the stir of leaf and burr
Their funnybones should tease.

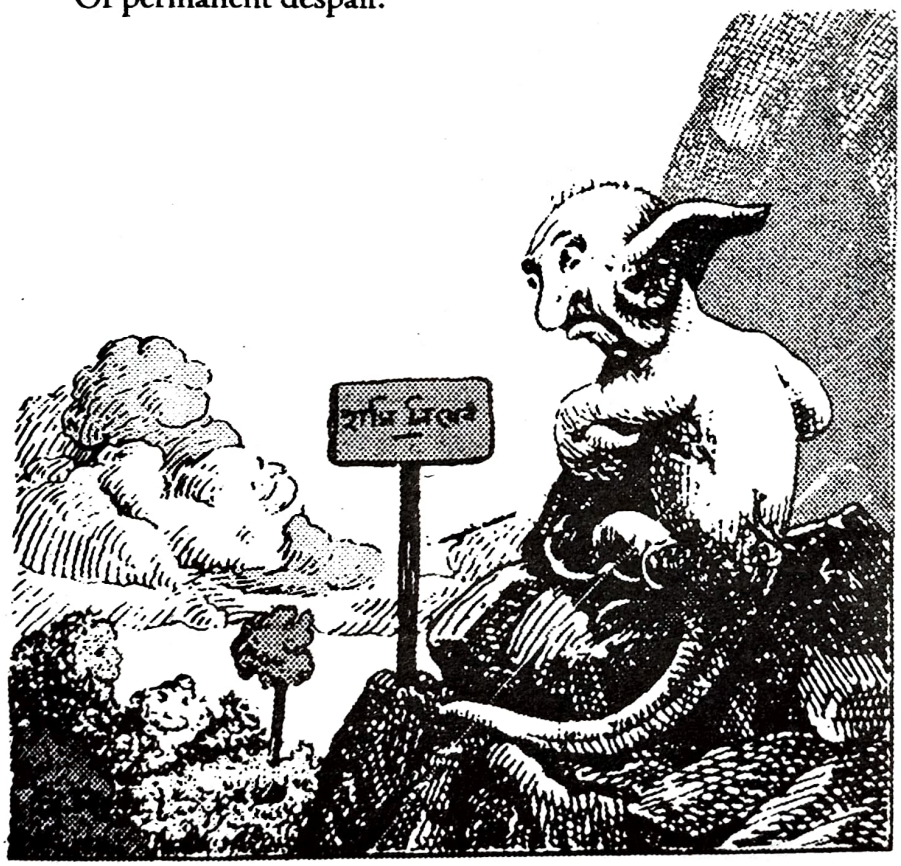
They keep a wary eye
On the autumn sky
For signs of mirth above the earth
In foaming cumuli.

The darkness of the night
Brings them no respite,
As fireflies extemporise
Their dances of delight.



Those of you who're jolly
And feel to woe is folly
Must not refuse the Rangaroos
Their right to melancholy.

The Rangaroosian lair
Bereft of sun and air
Is doomed to be a monastery
Of permanent despair.



Sukumar Ray / Satyajit Ray
NONSENSE RHYMES

ODOUR IN THE COURT

The King sat down on the throne and turned to the Minister.
'What's this smell,' he asked, 'that smells so sinister?'
The Minister said, 'It's from my cloak, Your Highness –
A new perfume I've bought today. It's the finest.'
'That,' said the King, 'the Court Physician should settle.'
The Physician came and said, 'I'd prove my mettle
If a cold hadn't made my nostrils quite impassable.'
The King then turned to the ageing priest in the chasuble.
'Come here, Priest,' he said, 'and please identify
The irksome smell that the air of the court does vilify.'
The cleric said, 'I've just now taken a pinch of snuff,
Hence my nostrils aren't quite clear enough.'
The King dismissed his priest and sent for the sentinel.
The sentry marched in promptly. The King said, 'Can't you tell
What this odour is that our work does hamper?'
'Your Highness,' answered the sentry, 'the smell of camphor
In my betel still pervades my senses;
I couldn't guess what the obnoxious essence is.'
The King said, 'Off with you!' and sent for the strongman.
Bhimsing the wrestler came and proved quite the wrong man.
'Your Highness,' the wrestler said, his muscles bulging,
'I'm not in the best of health – I hate divulging.'
The King looked grim, then suddenly cried, 'By thunder,
Why not ask my distant cousin named Chunder?'
'Chunder dear,' the King implored, 'don't fail me.'
With a raucous laugh old Chunder said, 'Impale me,
Or hang me by my neck just any old season,
But forcing a man to smell, defies all reason.'

At the back of the court sat Nazir, a nonagenarian,
Thinking: I'm old; I haven't much longer to carry on –
What do I care if the scent should prove to be killing?
For a sack of gold I'd smell it; I'm perfectly willing.
So Nazir hobbled to the King and said his wish.
The King said, 'Do it, Nazir. I'll give you bakshish.'
Nazir went up to the minister, and down he bent
To plant his nostrils right on the source of the scent.
Wondrous feat! The courtiers turned applauders:
'Long live Nazir – Defier of Odious Odours!'

BABURAM THE SNAKE CHARMER

Hullo there, Baburam – what have you got in there?
Snakes? Aha – and do you think there's one that you could spare?
You know, I'd love to have one, but let me tell you this –
The ones that bite aren't right for me – nor the ones that hiss.
    I'd also skip the ones that butt,
    As well as the ones that whistle,
    Or the ones that slink about
    Or show their fangs, or bristle.
As for eating habits, I think it would be nice
To go for ones that only take a meal of milk and rice.
I'm sure you know the kind of snake I want from what I've said.
Do let me have one, Baburam, so I could bash its head.

Old Tickler

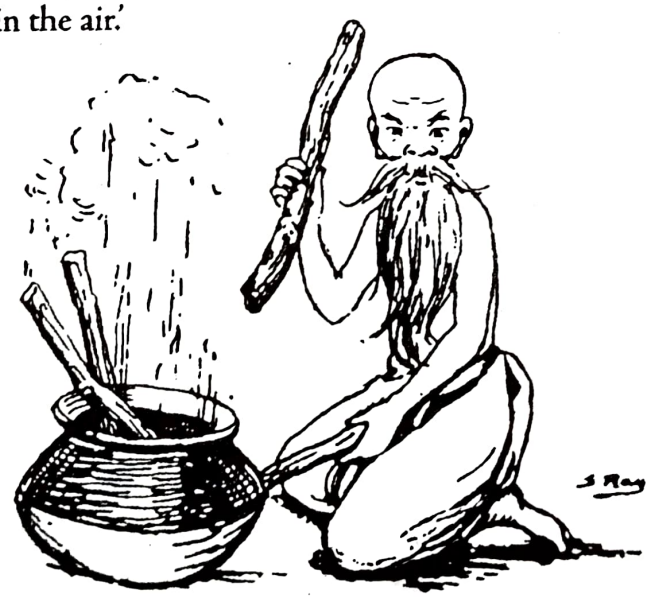
Go East or West, go North or South, by land or sea or air,
But before you go, make sure old Tickler isn't there.
Tickler is a terror, and I'll tell you what he's after –
He'll have you stuffing tickle chops until you choke with laughter.
It's hard to tell just where he lives, and harder to restrict him,
He's always just around the corner looking for a victim.
His method is quite simple: he'll grab you by your sleeve
And tell you anecdotes which he insists you must believe.
He thinks they're very funny, while others find them grim
(They have to keep on laughing, though, so as to humour him).
One wouldn't mind the stories if they were all one had to bear,
He also uses tickle-feathers, which is most unfair,
And so he goes on cackling, 'Oh, but don't you think it's funny! –
Aunt Kitty selling pigeons' eggs and figs and cloves and honey.
The eggs are long and conical, the cloves are convoluted,
The figs have arabesques on them nicely executed.
From dawn till dusk Aunt Kitty sings a string of motley airs,
All mews and barks and brays and neighs (Aunt Kitty calls
them Prayers).'
Saying so, he brings his hand behind your back to pinch you,
At which you have to laugh unless you want that he should
lynch you.

S.Ray.

THE OLD WOODMAN

The old man doesn't seem to mind
The sun that's getting hotter,
He sits and licks a wooden stick
That's just been boiled in water.
He hums a tune and mumbles words,
And shakes his balding head;
It seems as if he's twice as wise
As anybody dead.
'The holes you find in wood,' he says,
'Have reason to be there;
They're caused – and no one knows this yet –
By cobwebs in the air.
But who cares for all this knowledge?'
Screams the old man, fuming.
'A bunch of dolts – that's what they are,
Pretending and presuming.
I've told them time and time again,
They haven't understood,
What moonless nights are apt to do
To holes that go with wood.'
Graphs and charts and formulae
He scribbles on the wall,
Subdividing types of wood
And analysing all.

Tasty wood and tangy wood
And wood that's hard to savour,
And all that lies concealed in holes
And all the hidden flavour.
He claps the wooden sticks together
Saying, 'These are sticks
Which hold no secrets for me now that
I know all their tricks.
All the wooden villainy, and
All the wooden wiles,
Wooden ills and wooden woes, and
Beaming wooden smiles.
Some wood is wise and some is not,
But holes are always there,
And only I can see they're caused
By cobwebs in the air.'



GROOMY TIDINGS

My dear sir, do let me shake your hand –
Your daughter's soon to wed, I understand.
Great news. Congrats. Now, luckily
I know this Gangaram, the groom-to-be.
Splendid chap. You've won a fair prize –
Though not so fair, ha-ha, complexion-wise!
His face reminds me of – now, let me see –
Ah, yes – an owl: the same rotundity.
Education, sir? Now, there's a lad
With the strength of will that's to be had.
He sat for final tests at school. No luck. He flopped.
Nineteen times he tried, and then he stopped.
Financial state, you ask? His property?
He's sunk in debts as far as I can see!
His brothers are a sorry bunch, I fear.
One's loony, one's a racketeer.
A third they put the clinkers on because
By forging money he was breaking laws.
The youngest one, I gather, plays the drum
In restaurants, and earns a paltry sum.
Gangaram himself despairs to fight his
Ailments of the spleen and hepatitis.
But mark you, sir, his noble ancestry –
Ganga branches from a princely tree.
Sham Lahiri (and it has been proved)
Is Gangaram's own cousin, thrice removed.
Looking for a future son-in-law
I daresay you could hardly ask for more.

Sukumar Ray / Satyajit Ray
NONSENSE RHYMES

Uncle's Invention

Chandidas's uncle has invented a device
Which is causing everyone to praise it to the skies.
When Uncle was a year old, or maybe even younger,
He came out with a lusty yell that sounded just like 'Goonga'.
At such an age most other tots just manage 'Glug' and 'Mum',
So 'Goonga', like a thunderbolt, struck everybody dumb.
And all who heard, said 'Here's a boy – provided he survives –
Will one day surely bring about a change in human lives.'
It seems the day is here at last, and victory is won
With what will make a five-mile walk seem like only one.
I've seen the contrivance myself, and say with confidence
Never had invention had such great significance.
Let me tell you how it strikes the eyes of a beholder:
First of all, one notes that you must strap it to your shoulder.
An arm extends, and from its end one notes there hangs a hook
To which you bait some foodstuff which you either buy or cook.
Naturally the choice depends upon your predilections
(It's wiser to restrict yourself to hookable confections).
The sight of morsel dangling close provokes the urge to eat
Which, transcribed to motive force, soon propels the feet.
Before you know you're on the go, your mind intent on feeding,
But since the food is travelling too you never stop your speeding.
The outcome, I need hardly add, will change our whole existence
Because we'll walk for nourishment, and never mind the distance.
No wonder there's a move afoot to honour Uncle soon
For bestowing on humanity an everlasting boon.

Sukumar Ray / Satyajit Ray
NONSENSE RHYMES

Sukhumar Ray / Satyajit Ray
NONSENSE RHYMES

PREY FOR ME

Don't be scared, my little man –
Think I'm going to bite you?
Silly notion! Don't you know
I have no strength to fight you?

My heart is full of kindness
With no anger underneath,
And all the biting that I do
Is seldom with my teeth.

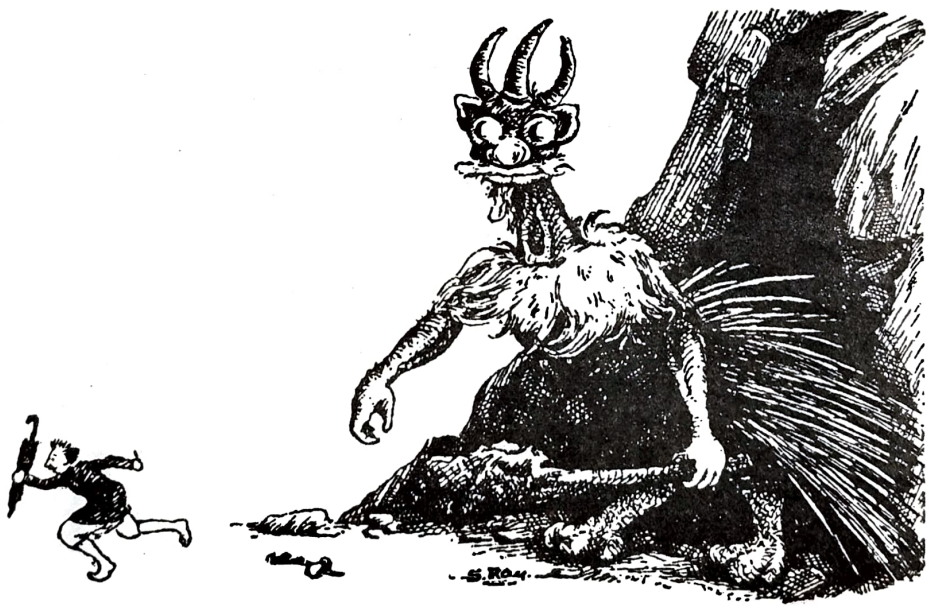
I know the horns upon my head
Must seem a trifle shocking,
But butting pains my head, and so
They're seldom used for knocking.

Come into my lair, little man
And live with me a while
I'll treat you as a dear friend
And put you up in style.

The club I'm holding in my hand –
Now, does that cause you panic?
It's light as feather, take my word,
It only looks titanic.

Well, well – I see you're not convinced
By all that I have said,
It's time I grabbed you by your legs
And knocked you on the head.

My wife and dozen kids and I
Believe it's downright silly
To let escape a stupid man
Who's scared willy-nilly.



This translation by Satyajit Ray was published in *Prastuti Parba*, Sukumar Ray special issue, 1982.

(*Top*) The cover calligraphy by Sukumar Roy for his book
(*Above*) The picture accompanying the title poem, showing another example of his lettering

Word versus Synonym: The Poetics of Rejection

Sibaji Bandyopadhyay

Translated by Parantap Chakraborty

Comprehension and miscomprehension

Ābol Tābol begins with an "Explanation". It differs in character and form, linguistic and tonal, from other forewords. Sukumar Ray pokes the reader by announcing that "This book is a work of the *kheyāl rasa*. So this is not a book meant for those who aren't inclined to this *rasa*".[1] This would mean that those deprived of the *kheyāl rasa*, and those who cannot appreciate the absurd, are not welcome into the nonsense world of *Ābol Tābol*. Sukumar Ray is well aware of the fact that however free-flowing his style may be, it is neither easy to access nor digest. The "Explanation" creates the space for the rest of the *Ābol Tābol* poems, which present a set of weird characters. There is a common thread among these obsessive believers of bizarre theories. Satyajit Ray comments:

> "The holes you find in wood," he says,
> "Have reason to be there;
> They're caused—and no one knows this yet—
> By cobwebs in the air."
>
> A proponent of such a revolutionary theory has to be placed together with the Shadow Seller, the inventor of Phutoscope, Chandidas's Uncle and the Boss Babu.[2]

1 Sukumar Ray, *Ābol Tābol*, in *Upendrakishor o Sukumār Rachanāsamagra*, ed. Satya Chakrabarti (Kolkata, 1983), p. 420. [*Kheyāl* means whimsy; there is no such *rasa* (aesthetic flavour, essence) in classical Indian theory, the nearest *rasa*s being *hasya* (comic) and *adbhuta* (wondrous). Textual interpolations by the editor-publisher of the present book are placed within square brackets.]

2 Satyajit Ray, "*Bhumikā*", in *Sukumār Rāy-er Samagra Shishu Sāhitya*, vol. 1 (Kolkata, 1973), p. 3.

The list can be expanded further. The Cautious Man from "*Sābdhān*", the King sitting on baked bricks, the Hammerman or Quack, the theorist from "*Bujhiye Balā*" and many more can effortlessly stand alongside them. These unbalanced people have a sense of regret, a massive complaint about the world. The wood-specialist Woodman is sad because no one can gauge his in-depth expertise: "But who cares for all this knowledge?" The Boss Babu suffers from a similar problem. He expresses his anger quite strongly at his office subordinates who fail to see the uniqueness of his moustache. All these characters in various ways make the same point: No one understands what they say, or hears it out, for that matter. However complex their sentences or deep their interest in mysteries of creation or spontaneous their will to do good for the world, no one turns to them or rates their valuable sermons. The narrator is present, the speech ready but no listeners—the sender is one hundred percent ready but there is no recipient. This makes the lonely beings so angry. But they know that there is a reason for this lack of interest: the stupid and inept turn away. The learned are willing to twist their ears to make them listen. However, there is only one problem. The ears are hard to reach both literally and metaphorically.

The sad and angry figures in *Ābol Tābol* are set beside Sukumar Ray's claim that this book is not for everyone, not everyone is a fit audience for the bizarre *rasa*. It is important to identify the two distinct kinds of not comprehending in order to understand fully the source of fun in *Ābol Tābol*.

The Woodman whose balding head is heated and who sweats under the pressure of complex musings and a huge weight of wisdom, angrily curses at the opposition's tendency to break into an argument:

A bunch of dolts—that's what they are,
Pretending and presuming.
I've told them time and time again,
They haven't understood.

Not just the Boss Babu of "The Missing Whiskers" ("*Gonph Churi*"), none of them pays any heed to anyone else's words, does not consider any objection coming from any other quarter, but always wants everyone else to accept their words without any argument. All they want is a "Yes sir" coterie. Whether there is a vested interest or not, the row can end only if the recipient obediently etches the sender's righteous sermons inside his head. The wise men have undertaken this brainwash mission only to ensure the prosperity, comfort and good health of the protégé. The wise men in Sukumar's work do not stand argumentative people. Although they often complain that the world has gone deaf, a deeper look into the matter would show it is they who are hard of hearing. The know-it-all pundits of Sukumar tend to think calamity will strike if anything topples the a priori form of truth that has been cemented in their minds. The self-illuminators of this kind not only end up incarcerating themselves into the narrow confines of the light of their knowledge but do the same to others as well. Their hearts are filled with a sense of completeness that there is no perforation in this scheme. Empowered by this sense of security they stand tall, unfazed, and blow away anything that comes from the opponent.

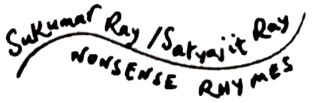
The theorists with biased perspectives have a boundary to their knowledge so well measured that it is impossible to curb or add to it, it is also impossible to alter the pattern. Anything that falls outside this boundary is deemed impractical and illogical by them. We can recall Bidyebojhai [literally "Wisdom-Weighted"] Babu of the "*Jibaner Hisāb*" poem from Sukumar Ray's other book *Khāi Khāi*: the well-groomed babu was increasingly taking pity in the boatman's silence against the stream of scientific questions, such as why does the sun rise, why does the moon wax and wane, why do tides arrive. Amazed at his ignorance, the egghead babu calculated and predicted that a sizeable percentage of his life is already wasted. Other self-centred pundits like the babu believe that the unfortunates have to come to them in order to fallow the barren human field or to

render the wasted life golden, they are the only means to that end. This implies that people have to unquestioningly accept their theories and by extension their hegemony. If anyone wishes to step inside the boundary of knowledge, it would necessarily translate into coming into the clutches of the oligarchy, renouncing anything inherent to one's own self. If you accept the knowledge of the theorists as true, then you also accept their power as true. Because that knowledge is associated with power—knowledge and power here are intrinsically connected and are inseparable.

The fetish of speech and thought

One cannot simply tag the arch theorists pervading *Ābol Tābol* obsessive and extravagant and move on. One can recognize some of these faces in the crowd. And some of them do not provoke any laughter at all. These people are not entirely imaginary creatures, they come from the world surrounding our neighbourhood. Even though the sharp theorists of *Ābol Tābol* seem eccentric, in essence they are gross exaggerations of the grim-faced serious-looking people all around us, they are far more familiar than unfamiliar. Then can it all be gibberish or illogical? Jibanananda Das believed, "The world of Sukumar Ray which is reflected in *Ābol Tābol* is not the reality of our everyday world or its reflection; however, it is as real and familiar."[3] The "more familiar", more real world of *Ābol Tābol* is perhaps really known to us, and therefore it facilitates the ability to understand the half-known everyday world more deeply and untangle reality. We learn from surrealist art, and actually from all realist art, that the world can be portrayed without the blind replication of reality. Many Surrealists regarded Nonsense as more than merely gibberish, topsy-turvy stuff, and worthy of being considered high poetry. Surrealist poetics makes

3 Jibanananda Das, *Jibanānanda Dās-er Patrābali*, ed. Dinenkumar Basu, vol. 1 (Kolkata, 1981), p. 19.



it possible to be simultaneously connected and disconnected to reality. Some examples of these are also to be found in Nonsense. The topsy-turvy world of Sukumar Ray is a contrapuntal self-sufficient world in spite of having a connection to reality. If one is to understand through what measures it takes its form, one needs to delve into how Sukumar wades through the impenetrable network of overwhelming words and how he counters those words with his own words.

The scientist in the poem "*Bijnān Shikshā*" ("Science Education") is extra eager to examine the deposition of dross into a boy's brain and the extent of his intelligence, with his self-invented Phutoscope [literally "hole scope"] machine. The uber-intelligent man is preoccupied with scientifically measuring the boy's intelligence by placing a "*magnet*" on his head, "*reflecting*" it with a bamboo and calculating the "*velocity*" with a brick. Although the picture accompanying the poem depicts a boy standing with a clenched fist, his gaping mouth suggests he is screaming and not quite ready to become a guinea pig in this fearsome experiment. The use of English words such as *velocity*, *reflect*, *magnet*, Subir Raychaudhuri observes, "provides the scientist with a sense of professional seriousness. The use of the Bengali words instead would not have the same effect."[4] English on the one hand, Sanskrit on the other; scientific terms on the one hand, philosophical on the other—these are tools in Sukumar Ray's hands to create laughter—because he can make use of the subtle, almost invisible connections that girdle vocabulary, and through what process these vocabularies become independent and self-abiding, going beyond meaning into pure sound and becoming weapons for the theorists.

Sukumar Ray deals with the anarchy and torment of language that flees the refuge of feeling, words that escape the clutches of meaning, in his essay "*Bhāshār Atyāchār*" ("Torture of Language").

4 Subir Raychaudhuri, "*Dhwani Theke Drishye: Sukumār Rāy-er Shabdatattwa*", in *Sukumār Parikramā*, ed. Pabitra Sarkar (Kolkata, 1989), p. 133.

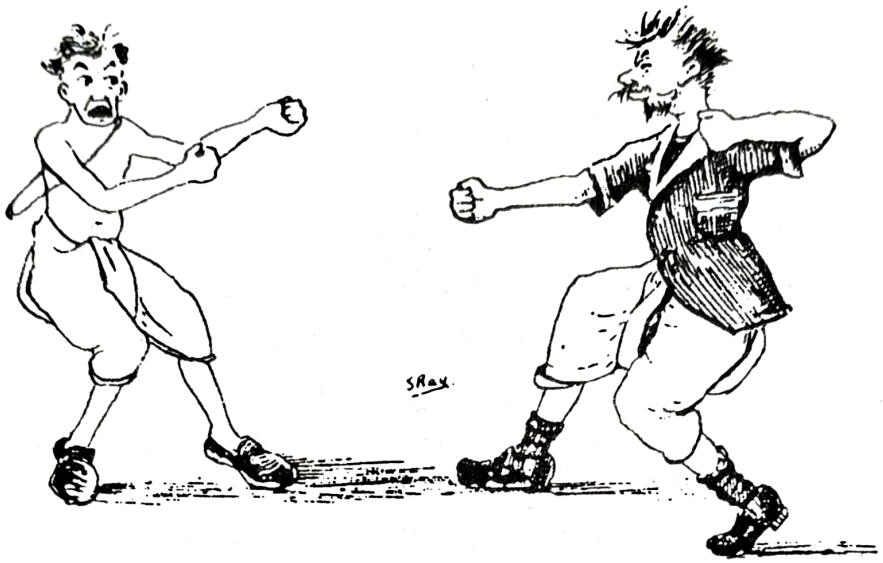
He sought examples from Western science and Indian philosophy to explicate how thinking ability is compromised and how vision is blurred under the pressure of the sound clusters that are intoxicated with their autonomy:

> I do not see the need to investigate what Darwin's evolutionary theory exactly is. However, we accept the word Evolution like a pundit and also freely express our opinion about it. We use words like *Saguna-Nirguna, Purusha-Prakriti, Prāna-Kārana, Shabda-Brahma, Hiranya-Garbha*, etc. to add weight to our own speculations. However, the original essence/ meaning of the word is lost for good, which we fail to notice. We get so accustomed to each word of this sort that we keep on repeating it like memorized phrases; thought recedes accordingly.[5]

At the same time, he thought, "People get attached to words and not their actual meaning for the same reason that they get swayed by the decorum of the shastras and forget their core values."[6] For Sukumar Ray, "streamlining of thought" and beating about the bush are the same, mutually contained. His essay "*Daiven Deyam*" discussed the "Fetish of speech and thought".[7]

The illustration for the poem "*Nārad! Nārad!*" shows two fighters. If the illustration is read alongside the poem, the identities of the two figures are somewhat revealed. In truth, most of Sukumar Ray's illustrations complement his poems: they are not mere imitations or slaves. On the other hand, the additional information gathered from the illustrations does not defy the logic of the poems either: the aural and the visual combine to create the text. The two eloquent boxers are

5 Sukumar Ray, "*Bhāshār Atyāchār*", in *Barnamālātattwa o Bibidha Prabandha* (Kolkata, 1963), pp. 20-21.
6 Ibid, p. 20.
7 Sukumar Ray, "*Daiven Deyam*", in *Barnamālātattwa o Bibidha Prabandha* (Kolkata, 1963), p. 53.

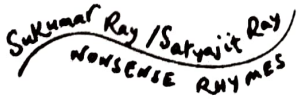


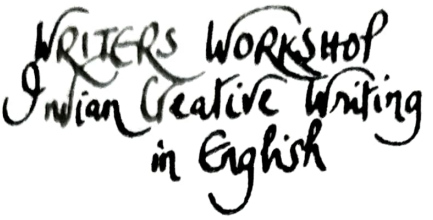
ready to punch each other, with gritted teeth, their bodies dripping with anger and their hair erect. Both wear dhotis and boots, one of them with socks and the other one without. The first person has a sacred thread on his naked upper body and his Brahmin arrogance is awkwardly put on display. The second man wears a shirt, his moustache straightened in excitement. Their fight is over strange allegations like calling white red and snoring all night; they seek revenge through beating each other up and have entered the ring. Their vocabulary is as incredible as their shouting is powerful. Undiluted Bengali is not enough for them, they use English words or phrases to make their point. One of them also uses Hindi and his estimation is absolutely right: "*Choprao tum*" ["You shut up"] is much more painful to the ear than its Bengali equivalent. Also, it is easier to demean your lower-class imaginary opponent by using English expressions in interactions with them. The actual battle happens through words and not action: words are the weapons deployed to deflate the opponent's ego. And the most significant weapon here is the English language. However, words or phrases [some spelt as commonly mispronounced by Bengalis] like "*istupid*", "*speakti not*", "*I don't care*", "*sando*", "*alright come'n' fight*" at one level help to express anger; at another they link the two verbal wrestlers in an inseparable bond, making them subservient to their inherent power. It is no wonder that when one laments the

missed chance of teaching his opponent a lesson owing to the absence of the maternal uncle, the other promptly threatens to call the police, and both fighters recoil like salt-splattered leeches and put an end to the fight. After completing the ceremony of mutual revenge with *"how do you do good night"*, each walks homeward. The imminent battlefield that was built between the two verbal wrestlers—neither actually dares to enter that ring. As one unabashedly confirms [in Bengali], "I'm not at all angry," he also seals the peace treaty [with an offer to eat together]: "*Very very sorry, maslā khābi?* [share some masala?]" Then is everything a mere enactment of anger? Would this skit of skirmish be futile without this verbal fight punched with a pinch of English? Would it then defeat the grammar of quarrel? But there is no respite from the grammar whose rules may or may not be known to man. The universe of idea is subservient to English. Whoever may possess the power to ignore, to overlook the pervasive hegemony of English, the Bengali *bhadralok* certainly does not possess it. His consciousness has to respond to the signals of this new-wordly-Brahma. The entry into corridors of power and job vacancies is determined by the competence in English.

The sacred thread is combined with boots. We have assimilated East and West. Does Sukumar Ray draw our attention to this kedgeree theory in "*Khichuri*" ("Stew Much!")? If he intends to destabilize the assimilative myth that binds *bhadralok* society, then we may say that his oeuvre is a counter-discourse. But it is very difficult for the counter-narrative to get rid of the constricting binds imposed by the mainstream narrative; various movements in art and literature of Bengal are replete with such instances. Like many others, Sukumar Ray too could not evade this contamination. In spite of the incredible seriousness of his characteristic scientific culture and clarity of vision, Sukumar Ray could not completely free himself from the influence or clutches of mainstream narrative.

(From Chapter Six of *Gopāl-Rākhāl Dwandwasamās*, Kolkata: Papyrus, 1991)





WRITERS WORKSHOP was founded in 1958. It consisted of a group of writers who agreed in principle that English had proved its ability, as a language, to play a creative role in Indian literature, through original writing and transcreation from India, the Commonwealth, and other English-using territories. Discussions were held on Sunday mornings at 162/92 Lake Gardens, Kolkata, and diffusion done through books issued under the WORKSHOP imprint. Since 1971 the WORKSHOP laid increasing emphasis on its publishing programme. Since October 1999 the Sunday one-hour morning session was devoted to a śloka-by-śloka reading by P. Lal at the Sanskriti Sagar Library, of his complete English transcreation of the *Mahābhārata* of Vyāsa. Since November 2010, P. Lal's son, Ananda Lal, directs the WORKSHOP.

The WORKSHOP is non-profit and non-political. It involves writers who are sympathetic to the ideals and principles commonly accepted as embodied in creative writing; it is concerned with practice not theorizing, helpful criticism not iconoclasm, the torch not the sceptre. Not impressed by desire for quick fame and money, WRITERS WORKSHOP upholds the primacy of stable ethical and moral values, and prefers writing that enshrines humanist principles, which are of special relevance in the context of the multi-cultural historical palimpsest of the civilization known as India.

Further details are available from the WORKSHOP address: 162/92 Lake Gardens, Kolkata 700045, India (E-mail: writerşworkshopkolkata@gmail.com) and the WW website: www.writersworkshopindia.com

WRITERS WORKSHOP ~ A Credo by P. Lal

Glory be to Mahakala. It is now 2010. I am four score and two. Time for some home truths. Because WRITERS WORKSHOP has close to 3500 separate titles in its checklist (published over 50 years 1958-2008), there is a misconception that it is an Indian publishing leviathan. (No other publisher in India has that many titles on its list.) The truth is much less awesome. WRITERS WORKSHOP has no office; it operates from my residence, from the living-room and a multi-purpose bedroom. It has no secretary; my "secretary" is a three-tiered Godrej filing cabinet. It has no editor, no "readers" to inspect, evaluate and OK typescripts; I do all three tasks. It has no proofreader; I perform the nitty-gritty of deleting, accreting and correcting. It has no "assistant" to acknowledge or follow up letters; I do all that too. It has no typewriter; I reply in longhand. (From 2004, kowtowing to the hi-tech convenience, I sometimes seek help from my computer-savvy grand-daughter Shuktara to e-mail replies to insistent and urgent enquiries for WW information.) It has no retail or wholesale distribution "outlet"; there is only a cubby-hole of a kiosk at my residence (8 feet x 4 feet roughly), where a dedicated assistant attends to intermittent sales of WW books. This Lake Gardens kiosk opened in 1998, 40 years after WW's inception. Footing found, it stays put.

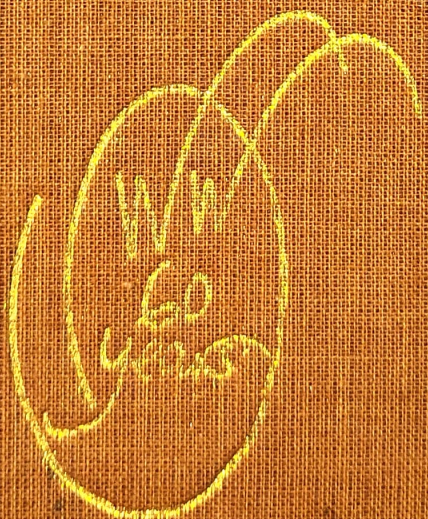
How then has WW survived? Without plush foundations to back it, without advertisement, without large-hearted patrons? Initially, by the skin of our teeth (1958-1964). Then (1965-1990) by my visits to hard-currency El Dorados, specially the USA, UK and Australia on lecture assignments and visiting professorships on two dozen or so occasions, and pumping the shekels thus earned to keep alive a gasping ideal.

Alternative publishing is desperately needed wherever commercial publication rules. WW is not a professional publishing house. It does not print well-known names; it makes names known and well known, and then leaves them in the loving clutches of the so-called "free" market (which can be and is very cut-throat and very expensive). It is not sad, it is obnoxious, to plead, as publishers do, "I will not publish poetry because it does not sell." Most English book-publishing today in boom-time India and outside is book-dumping. There is a nexus between high-profile PR-conscious book publishers, semi-literate booksellers, moribund public and state libraries, poorly informed and nepotistic underlings in charge of book-review pages and supplements of most national newspapers and magazines, and biased bulk purchases of near-worthless books by bureaucratic institutions set up — believe it or not! — to inform, educate and elevate the reading public. Wonders never cease.

I strongly believe that, instead of catering and pandering to existing lowest-common-denominator popular taste, a self-respecting writer should create a literary taste by which he or she may be enjoyed by discriminating readers.

Because WW goes in for serious creative writing, and because there is no satisfactory distribution network for such writing, the whole process is a cottage industry-style low-key entrepreneurship in the belief that small is not only beautiful but viable as well. Vanity and sponsored publishing? Yes, I am humanly vain about it and I do sponsor what I think is good writing. If any lover of literature will offer to subsidise, with no strings attached, striking new work by talented Indian poets, fiction-writers and belles-lettrists, please get in touch with me. The gesture will be acknowledged, appreciated, accepted, and implemented. Such Good Samaritan generosities, not market forces, are at the root of civilised and significant publishing the world over. The Pharisees are neatly bypassed.

[P. Lal passed away on 3 November 2010]


WW
60
years